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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the evolution of curriculum reform in Mississippi from a state level, norm-referenced accountability system to a performance-based, centralized accreditation system that integrates instructional management requirements into improvement standards. Accountability legislation has primarily been concerned with quality of student improvement and requires that curricular change bring about performance improvement. With the 1975 accountability law, Mississippi's department of education began building a statewide management system through a norm-referenced testing program. The department prepared guidelines for local accountability programs, but because curricular content varied, districts retained their autonomous character, in opposition to a small, relatively weak education department. The Education Reform Act of 1982 introduced a criterion-referenced program based on basic skills and a performance-based accreditation system, and the act abolished prior curricular requirements. Accreditation became the state's mechanism for implementing change. The education department identified principles of instructional accountability, including course definition through a set of objectives encompassing state-mandated content and adoption of objectives by local boards as basic curriculum requirements. In 1985-86, reforms identified basic skill areas and required that local administrators be held accountable for instructional management systems. Mississippi's programs thereby became part of a centralized management system over an 11-year period. (CJH)

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A Developmental Perspective of State Policy Initiatives in Instructional Management in the State of Mississippi

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Introduction and Background

One of the current trends in education is a move from local control to state control (Kirst, 1984; Odden and Odden, 1984). The expansion of state control of education is reflected in the number and scope of reform initiatives passed by state legislatures in the last five years (Mitchell and Encarnation, 1984). Both have occurred in response to increasing public concern for the quality of education and awareness of the proportion of public money that is spent on education. Dissatisfaction with the return on the investment of education dollars has triggered demands for accountability and improvement that are the themes of state policy agendas today.

Meaningful improvement efforts in education must target its primary functions, curriculum and instruction, and produce evidence of the effectiveness of both with regard to student performance. Addressing both curriculum, through expressions of content, and instruction, through evaluation of student performance on defined content, appears to be necessary for significant improvement of student learning (Resnick and Resnick, 1985).

Experience with these matters has led to increasing use of criterion-referenced assessment to provide accurate information about school and student performance. Research evidence indicates that a tightly defined instructional system that includes an evaluation and feedback component can improve both student performance and teacher performance (Fuchs, Deno, and Mirkin, 1984; Popham, Cruse, Rankin, Sandifer, and Williams, 1985).

This paper traces the recent evolution of curriculum reform in the State of Mississippi, from a state-level norm-referenced accountability system to

a state- and local-level criterion-referenced system of school improvement. States initiate demands for accountability out of a desire to achieve one or more of three primary goals for education: efficiency in operations and particularly with regard to fiscal matters; equality in terms of opportunities for learning extended to all populations within our society; and quality, with respect to the performance of educational institutions and their students (Mitchell and Encarnation, 1984; Glasman, 1986). Examination of state statutes for educational accountability in Mississippi indicates that quality has been the chief concern behind these laws. The quality at issue is quality of performance, or student achievement, and this leads in turn to the curriculum, which identifies what it is that students should learn. Thus, the educational accountability legislation in Mississippi requires curricular change in order to improve the level of student performance in the state.

The 1975 Accountability Law

The first educational accountability legislation in Mississippi was passed in 1975. It established a program that would

> obtain and provide meaningful information to the citizens about the public elementary and secondary education schools in this state. This information about educational performance should relate to educational goals adopted by the department, to student achievement in areas of the school curriculum, and to investigation of meaningful relationships within this performance. (Mississippi State Department of Education, 1979, p. 2)

Under the law, the State Department of Education was required to provide an annual review of student performance in selected areas of the curriculum. Local school boards were required to develop a local accountability program that would "measure the adequacy and efficiency of educational programs offered by the school district" (Mississippi State Department of Education, 1979, p. 4) and also had to report annually the information obtained by this program.

The State Department of Education responded to the legislation by establishing a norm-referenced testing program that administered the California Achievement Test, 1970 edition, and the Short Form Test of Academic Aptitude in grades four, six, and eight. These instruments were used to determine if students were achieving satisfactorily in language arts, mathematics and reading with respect to their basic ability levels. (Mississippi State Department of Education, n.d.)

The State Department of Education also prepared guidelines for local accountability programs using the acronym Accountability and Instructional Management or AIM to refer to the plans that were to be developed. AIM plans consisted of three parts which, taken together, established an instructional management system at either the district level or the school level. The first part, called the program design, was a visual outline of the organization and sequence of course content. The program design was intended to reflect what was to take place in the classroom (Morse and Saterfiel, 1979).

The second part of an AIM plan was the program description, organized in terms of input, process, and output statements. The program description identified a) the prerequisite materials, facilities, personnel, and skills necessary for a stated activity (inputs), b) all teacher and student activities that were to take place (processes), and c) the desired outcomes, or student behaviors, that were to be achieved (Morse and Saterfiel, 1979). Information comparable to that found in a lesson plan was to be included in the program description.

The third part of an AIM plan, the evaluation design, identified how student behaviors were to be assessed and established standards for judging successful performance (Morse and Saterfiel, 1979). The evaluation design provided the means of monitoring and judging the effectiveness of the instructional program.

A complete AIM plan implemented according to the guidelines provided a sequenced outline of course content; behavioral objectives; instructional strategies, including needed materials; and criterion-referenced test items for the objectives. Information about the reliability and validity of the test items was also to be provided. The plan was designed to provide information about student performance that could be aggregated at the classroom, school, and district levels, with emphasis placed on its value as a program evaluation tool.

In 1979, the Mississippi Commission on School Accreditation adopted standards requiring that each accredited school have an AIM plan in place by November 1, 1984 (Morse and Saterfiel, 1979). An annual report was also to be filed with the Commission that identified the areas of the instructional program in which standards were not being met and plans for improving these deficiencies. Reports on progress in developing AIM plans were to be filed annually beginning in 1980.

The state education system in Mississippi was characterized at this time by strong, fairly autonomous local school districts and a small, relatively weak state education agency. The initial accountability legislation did not alter this structure. Consequently, each district and schools within districts set out independently to develop their AIM plans with relatively little specific assistance provided by the state agency and little communication or coordination among districts. As might be expected, the quality of efforts varied widely, depending upon the financial and personnel resources of the district.

The AIM guidelines were one of the first intrusions by the state upon local district curriculum and represented the most explicit requirement at that time for defined content within an instructional program. Reactions of

both administrators and teachers were mixed, but typically included some confusion as to exactly what was required and some negativity regarding the perceived interference of the state in matters that had been local concerns.

Three common problems emerged during the developmental phase of AIM planning. One was inactivity on the part of administrators in initiating work on plan components; another was overzealousness on the part of administrators who attempted to complete their AIM plans ahead of schedule; the last was overactivity on the part of teachers in specifying the behavioral objectives for their courses. As a result, some districts were forced to attempt to develop AIM plans within short periods of time (one to two years), and some teachers were faced with literally hundreds of behavioral objectives requiring test items, administration and record keeping regarding student performance levels.

The Education Reform Act of 1982

In the midst of the developmental phase of AIM planning, the Mississippi Legislature passed a comprehensive education reform package that impacted directly on instructional management requirements. The Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982 was based upon findings in school effectiveness research and designed to accomplish a massive overhaul of the state's educational system. The Act replaced the norm-referenced testing program with a criterion-referenced program based upon a set of basic skills identified for grades three, five, eight, and eleven. An accreditation system focusing on performance of students and schools was established. All prior curriculum requirements were abolished and the State Department of Education was given authority to establish curriculum requirements and content. Through these and other measures, the Reform Act greatly expanded state control over local school districts, particularly with respect to curriculum matters, and moved toward

centralization of the state's education system through accreditation requirements.

The accreditation system was established as the State's mechanism for introducing and monitoring the mandated changes in the educational system. In building the requirements of the performance based accreditation system, the State Department of Education attempted to coordinate all curricular issues and to address concerns and problems that had arisen during development of AIM. The concept of instructional management was reexamined in light of mandates of the Education Reform Act, and seven principles of instructional accountability were identified in a concept paper (Mississippi State Department of Education, 1985). Those principles were:

1. Every course carrying academic credit must be defined through a set of learning objectives that include state-mandated content.

2. The objectives must be officially adopted by the local school boards as basic curriculum requirements.

3. Pass/fail decisions must be based upon student performance on the course objectives so that mastery earns a grade of at least D while nonmastery earns a grade of F.

4. Suggested instructional practices and resources must be identified for the objectives.

5. Performance standards must be established for all learning objectives.

6. Student performance on the objectives must be evaluated at least once during the school year.

7. Annually, actual student performance must be compared to the standards to determine if discrepancies exist. A plan for improving student performance must be written for all objectives on which performance levels do not meet standards. (pp. 4-5)

These principles reaffirmed the concepts set forth in the original AIM guidelines and specified local school board responsibility for taking action to implement instructional management systems in the school districts. The emphasis in the content paper was on use of information generated by the

instructional management system to improve the instructional program and, ultimately, school performance levels.

An advisory committee composed of practicing administrators and teachers was appointed by the State Superintendent of Education to consider the issue of instructional management and recommend future directions. In its final report (State Advisory Committee on Accountability and Instructional Management, 1985), the committee endorsed the concept of instructional management and the seven principles identified by the State Department of Education and issued twenty recommendations for fine-tuning implementation of the system. These recommendations ranged from leadership responsibilities for local district superintendents to staffing of the State Department of Education for administering instructional management to the necessity of staff development and alternative education programs to complement instructional management systems.

With the validity and viability of instructional management reinforced, the State Department of Education proceeded to build a revamped instructional management system through a series of Education Reform Act programs.

As a first step, the state testing program was changed to a criterion-referenced system by identifying basic skills, defined as the most essential content within the subject areas of reading, language arts, and mathematics. These skills were identified by committees of practicing Mississippi teachers and validated by all teachers statewide. The validated skills were then adopted by the State Board of Education as the foundation of a statewide curriculum structure.

Secondly, working through committees of teachers identified through the learned societies in the state, the State Department of Education drafted a

curriculum structure, consisting of a K-12 skills continuum including introductory and mastery levels, for twelve academic areas. The skills identified in the curriculum structure were reviewed by all teachers in the state who then selected core skills that were considered to provide appropriate general content within each subject area. The core skills in reading, language arts and mathematics included the basic skills identified through the statewide testing program. Districts were required to include the core skills in their instructional management systems and could optionally include other skills.

As a third step, the State Legislature reaffirmed its commitment to instructional management by passing legislation in its 1986 session that required implementation of the seven principles of instructional management and also established record keeping requirements for student performance on basic skills and core skills.

Finally, the State Board of Education adopted performance-based accreditation standards that held local school boards and administrators accountable for the development and implementation of instructional management systems that met the requirements of the new state law (Mississippi Department of Education, 1986). The specific accreditation requirements affecting instructional management include the development of instructional management plans for all subjects for which grades are issued; evaluation procedures that have been established as valid and reliable; collection and reporting of student performance on core skills; and action taken to upgrade student performance on core skills. In addition, school-level performance on the statewide testing program was specified as an outcome measure that would be collected and included in assessments of performance for accreditation purposes.

Summary

The State of Mississippi has spent the last eleven years building a comprehensive statewide instructional management system. Initially, instructional management was a locally-based concept, and curriculum content varied from district to district. With experience gained from developing the local instructional management systems and with legislation that centralized curriculum development at the state level, instructional management has evolved into a statewide system that has its roots in a statewide criterion-referenced testing program, a statewide curriculum structure with mandated core contents, and a performance-based accreditation system that is founded on the concept of accountability and that integrates instructional management requirements into its standards of performance.

All of these requirements are in the developmental or early implementation stages at this time, and it is too early to examine the success of such a system applied at the state level. Given Mississippi's traditional record of performance, any improvements effected by the system over the next several years should be relatively easy to detect.

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